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Tufted Duck at Lake Ogallala: First record for Nebraska

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On 2 December 1999, I was birding at the east end of Lake Ogallala in Keith County. I was scanning the large diving duck flock just above the Keystone diversion dam when I noticed a scaup-like duck with a thin crest. I quickly realized that the bird was a male Tufted Duck. I carefully studied the bird from 9:32-10:28 a.m. The bird spent all of its time actively foraging with a large flock of Greater and Lesser Scaup. It was approximately the same size as a Lesser Scaup. The head shape was rounded like a scaup, not "peaked" like a Ring-necked Duck. The bill was bluish with a black tip and a narrow white subterminal band, unlike the bill of a male Ring-necked Duck (black tip with a broad white subterminal band). The bill also lacked the white base of the bill of a male Ring-necked Duck. The eye was yellow. The head appeared dark-colored, except that it had a purplish sheen at some angles. The most conspicuous feature was the narrow crest, or tuft, which I estimated to be at least 5 cm long. This was visible at all times, except that it was sometimes flattened against the head immediately after the bird surfaced after a dive. The flanks were similar to those of a male Ring-necked Duck, except that they were a dirty white color instead of gray. The flanks were not clean white like those of many male Lesser Scaup. The mantle was conspicuously black, and lacked the pale vermiculations of a male Lesser Scaup. In flight, the upperwings were dark with a bold white stripe on the secondaries and inner primaries. The upperwing pattern very closely resembled that of a Greater Scaup. I did not note the tail pattern. On the basis of the flank color and long tuft, I aged the bird as an adult male molting into alternate plumage. According to Tootin (1998), the molt sequence of Tufted Ducks is consistent with this conclusion.

I had several opportunities to study the bird on later dates. On 4 December, I relocated the bird in the same general area, took several distant photographs, and confirmed my original identification. By 31 December, I noted that the crest had disappeared, and this was reaffirmed during many observations of the bird in January. On these occasions, I noted that the bird had a much "dumpier" appearance than a scaup, perhaps caused by a shorter neck. I also noted that there was a notch on the back of the head where the tuft should have been. I surmised that the tuft had worn off, a frequent occurrence with this species. On later occasions I noted that the flanks were a clean white color and lacked the darker smudging noted earlier in December. By early February, the tuft was again present.

I carefully considered the possibility that the bird was a hybrid, most likely with a Greater or Lesser Scaup. However, all of the features were consistent with a pure Tufted Duck; there were no white vermiculations on the mantle, the bill color was as expected for Tufted Duck, and the eye was yellow. None of the physical attributes of the bird pointed to anything other than a pure Tufted Duck. Additionally, I carefully examined the legs for bands while the bird was preening on 23 April; no bands were seen.

The Tufted Duck remained at this location through at least 29 April 2000 and was seen by dozens of birders. It was always with the large flock of Greater and Lesser Scaup and did not associate with Ring-necked Ducks or other diving ducks. This represents the first record of a Tufted Duck for Nebraska and one of very few records for the Great Plains. Relying heavily on Tootchin (Tootchin, M. 1998. Possible anywhere: Tufted Duck. *Birding* 30: 370-383.), I searched for other records of Tufted Ducks from the Great Plains region. I located records from Kansas (1), Colorado (1), and Wyoming (2), and Montana (1). Perhaps careful searching of large scaup flocks will produce more records of this species in Nebraska.